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SYMPOSIUM—ANTAGONISTIC FORCES

I. FALSE ECONOMIC IDEAS

BY CHARLES F. SMITH,

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Living in a city given over to the manufacture of hardware and kindred lines, in a state given over to manufacturing—with the employment age fixed at fourteen years—I can only claim to know the child labor question as I see it at home. Having some radical ideas on the subject, I have, fortunately, been able to put them into practice, and in putting them into practice have come to certain conclusions. If I state some of those conclusions before telling of the experiment, it is on the ground that when the cart precedes the horse, though it is not logical, it may be interesting.

It is my belief that the reason many employers of labor hire, when they can, boys fourteen years old and younger, is because they have not investigated carefully the relative economy of the boy of fourteen and his older brother. They have not in this matter made the observations, based on actual experiments, which they are used to making concerning every other factor in their business, and they are unable, therefore, to draw accurate conclusions. Many manufacturers who, as a result of careful experiment and study, know exactly the relative economies of different kinds of engines, boilers, machines, materials and processes, take it for granted, apparently without experiment, that the boy of fourteen must be more profitable than the boy of, say, sixteen, because his wages are less.

The Machine and the Man

This is one of the curious things in my manufacturing experience—to see how much study is given to the machine and how little to the man. The inanimate things that go into a manufactured product are scientifically analyzed and compared, and then selected; but science usually stops when it comes to the animate things, the human element, and whether this grade of labor at one price, or that grade at another, can be more profitably used, is a question that is not decided by her accurate methods.

Some day the study of the human element in factory work and in business—a very interesting study and one which sometimes brings you into altogether unexpected places—will get the attention it needs. Some day there will be, perhaps, in our technical schools a professorship of the humanities—and our future captains of industry may then, haply, be taught how to deal scientifically with the human element of production. When that time comes, problems of child labor, and many other labor problems, will be found vastly easier to solve.

An Experiment in Economy

But to get back to my own experiment, which is the reason why I have been invited to address you.

Some three years ago I became interested in the child labor movement. Soon after, the company I represent, employing now about 2000 operatives, 400 of them minors, stopped employing children under sixteen years of age, and for a long time has had no employee on its payrolls under that age. It is to be confessed frankly that this original action was prompted by sentiment, but, as it has worked out, it is reason based on experience that makes us now abide by it.

We have to pay a little more wages to a boy of sixteen than we would to one of fourteen, but he does a little more work; he does it a little better; he is a little better able to take care of himself; a little less likely to cause accidents to others, to himself or to the tools he uses; a little less likely to spoil things. He knows two years more than the boy of fourteen, and should develop into a better workman for that reason, and he is two years nearer the time when he will be one. It seems to us that, on the whole, he is, therefore, a better investment than the boy of fourteen.

There is another phase not to be overlooked, namely, the influence of this policy on the other operatives. Impossible as it is to estimate this, it is surely true that it helps to make a little kinder feeling toward the management. "Blood money," I have heard workmen call the wages paid to young children. A feeling so deep as that must, its cause being removed, have a reflex action not, indeed, to be measured, but certainly of some benefit to the employer, and well worth thinking about.

I do not attempt to speak of other than the industries kindred to

that in which I am engaged, though it seems the general features of the case might be true, speaking broadly, of all manufacture; but I have small doubt that if manufacturers in kindred industries would try the experiment they would duplicate our experience.

It is to be expected that the question will be asked: "What if there are not enough boys and girls of sixteen or older to fill the places now occupied by younger persons?" My answer is that such a shortage, if it should exist, should be made up by employing men and women; that we are not here primarily to do business; that any business which employs children so young that their physical and moral growth is dwarfed and stunted is, to the extent to which it so employs them, an evil in the community, and not a benefit.

Compensations

I do not wish to dogmatize, nor to argue from the success of our own experiment that if there were a national law fixing the age of employment at sixteen years, there would not be some increase in the first cost of doing business. Of course there would be, and it is a good thing that such should be the case; but there would be, to set over against that increase, many compensations. The betterment of the moral and physical health of the workers; the increased power of consumption that always comes with an increased wage; a better class of artisans as result of the extra two years available for educational purposes. Who shall say that in the long run there would not be sufficient compensation for the increased cost? But such a law is, I fear, a long way off, and my point is that at the present time in many industries it is possible for those employers who have advanced ideas on this question to put those ideas into practice without any, or, at most, a trifling expense to themselves.

Ultimately those great forces which slowly make for the more equal distribution of the burdens as well as the rewards of life will, by law, raise the age of employment. In the meantime, whoever can work out successfully in his business the experiment we have made can have the satisfaction of knowing that he is working on the side of the angels without its costing him anything, and that is a proposition which, whether viewed from the ethical or business standpoint, seems to me a very good one.